STEVE REICH

THE STRING QUARTETS

MIVOS QUARTET

Deutsche Grammophon

WTC 9/11

I. 9/11/01 (3:38)
II. 2010 (7:27)
III. WTC (4:37)

TRIPLE QUARTET

I. (7:10)
II. (4:05)
III. (3:32)

DIFFERENT TRAINS

I. AMERICA - BEFORE THE WAR (8:59)
II. EUROPE - DURING THE WAR (7:31)
III. AFTER THE WAR (10:25)

MIVOS PLAYS REICH

NOTES BY JOHN SCHAEFER

Thanks to H. Paul Moon for sharing his interview with Steve Reich for these notes

"I never expected to write a string quartet."

Steve Reich's initial response to the string quartet format was understandable: for the first twenty years of his career, the structure of his music consistently involved multiples of the same sound – whether phrases of speech in his early tape works, *It's Gonna Rain* and *Come Out*, or the titular instruments of *Piano Phase* and *Violin Phase*. An almost alchemical reaction takes place when two or more lines share the same timbre but move in and out of sync with each other. As Reich himself has noted, you could play *Piano Phase* on two harpsichords, but you couldn't play it on one piano and one harpsichord. His "Counterpoint" series, begun in 1982 with *Vermont Counterpoint* and its eleven flutes, extended that idea into a series of pieces for soloist playing against multiple pre-recorded parts of that same instrument. The string quartet, with its two violins, viola and cello, did not seem suited to this compositional process.

That all changed in 1988, and the solution was as simple as it was elegant: Reich treated the string quartet as a single, composite instrument. Suddenly, the format of soloist with recorded tracks, used in the "Counterpoint" works, made sense. The result was *Different Trains*. Inspired by the cross-country train rides the young Steve Reich took in the early 1940s – and the very different train rides a young Jewish boy like Reich would've taken in central Europe at that time – the piece wove together voice samples with multiple layers of string quartet, three of them pre-recorded and the final layer performed live.

It was the first of three pieces Reich would compose for the Kronos Quartet. The purely instrumental *Triple Quartet* followed in 1998, and *WTC 9/11*, built around voice samples relating to the World Trade Center attacks, in 2010. This recording marks the first time that all three have been gathered in one place, and it was the composer himself who suggested that the Mivos Quartet take on the challenge.

"I NEVER EXPECTED TO WRITE A STRING QUARTET."

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Two of these quartet pieces pose an interesting practical question. Reich says that any group performing *Different Trains* or *WTC 9/11* will ask him whether they should play the notated part on the page or adapt it to make explicit the implied melodies they hear in the voices. "I say, follow the voices; you'll get a guideline with the notation. Just stretch it and make it fit as seems appropriate. If you just play the notation, it'll work – but it won't work very well."

For this recording, according to Mivos violist Victor Lowrie Tafoya, the quartet "tended to incorporate shorter and sharper articulations, both to complement the text in *Different Trains* and *WTC 9/11*, and to highlight the rhythmic character of the accents and changing meters in *Triple Quartet*". For listeners familiar with the original Kronos recordings, some of these choices will be subtle, but others will be obvious. The first movement of *Different Trains* somehow seems faster; and the cello part that follows the voice saying "the crack train from New York" has a more elastic sound, instead of sounding like it's been fixed to a grid. And because of the multiple layers of pre-recorded sound, Reich's string quartet works also offer the possibility of different mixes. Early in *Different Trains*, for example, a rhythmic clanging beneath the phrase "from Chicago to New York" is brought further forward.

Different Trains is in Reich's preferred fast–slow–fast form, although it presents a continuous musical tale. "America – Before the War" is full of mid-century American optimism, the voices of a train porter and Reich's own governess nostalgically recalling the fast trains that tamed the country's huge expanse. "Europe – During the War" is of course much darker, with archival recordings of three Holocaust survivors. But much of the emotional change comes from the sampled train whistles. As Reich has noted, American train whistles had a bright sound; but their European counterparts were shrill. The melodies still derive from the voice samples, but the overall harmonic sound is profoundly coloured by those whistles.

"After the War" begins as if stirring from a nightmare, and soon rouses itself and builds to an extraordinary moment when a phrase from part one, "from New York to Los Angeles", returns, but newly harmonized and with the train whistles now creating their own simple melody. After the worst of storms, it is the sound of the sun breaking through. (This performance by Mivos reveals a slight hiccupping rhythm in this section – like a lingering echo of Reich's earlier "Phase" pieces.)

Different Trains does not end in sunshine, though. The porter's voice returns: "But today, they're all gone"; and in the final moments one of the voices from part two reminds us that we live in a world of both beauty and horror.

Early in his career, Reich had mused about the possibility of slowing down a recording of the voice without changing its pitch. By the time he wrote *WTC 9/11*, in 2010, that technology existed. The vocal excerpts were now more than just bits of speech-melody. Words and phrases could be extended – "came from Bostonnnnnnn", for example – and with these long digital tails, Reich says, "one person becomes part of the harmony of the next person speaking".

The first movement of *WTC 9/11* stands out because of the emotional content of those voices. In the later movements, and in *Different Trains*, we hear people remembering the past. But in "9/11/01", the sounds are of people living through the event – recordings from air traffic control and the New York Fire Department – and the panic in their voices is reflected in the urgency of the strings.

The second part, "2010", and the third movement, "WTC", return to the documentary approach to voices. "WTC" can of course mean World Trade Center, but Reich recalls his colleague David Lang pointing out that it could also stand for "world to come", and in this movement Reich focuses on the women who sat with the bodies of the dead (often for months owing to the difficulty in identifying the victims), singing psalms to ease the souls' journey

1: Mivos Quartet (EMPAC Concert Hall, NY) · 2: Steve Reich (One Rivington, NY) · 3: Steve Reich & Mivos Quartet (One Rivington, NY)

to the next world. The vocal samples include several instances of actual song or chant. Here again, the expressive content of the voice affects the texture of the strings, which at one point sounds almost like a chorale of French horns. At the end, Reich says, "it could have drifted off into nirvana – but that didn't feel right". And so we are left with the same disquieting sound the piece began with: a telephone off the hook.

Triple Quartet does not draw on vocal samples. It was inspired by the energetic ending of Béla Bartók's String Quartet No. 4, and that energy charges both of the outer movements. Part one is an ever-shifting web of short repeating phrases, tied together by the steady rhythm. The remarkable slow movement consists of questing, questioning figures over long, held tones – "basically one long, slow, multi-part canon", Reich says. The third movement returns to the excitement of the first, but now it's an excitement tinged with restlessness, or perhaps even alarm. It's subtly chromatic – the use of seconds (the interval between E and F sharp, for example) in the cello lines effectively unsettles all of the harmonies above it.

Clearly, *Triple Quartet* is not a conventional string quartet. But in this context, with Reich's other two works for the medium, it might seem that way. For a composer who never expected to find himself writing for string quartet, Reich has certainly made some distinctive, memorable music with it. And this recording, he says, "calls attention to the fact that there *is* a body of work like this".

Mivos Quartet (EMPAC Concert Hall, NY)

Mivos Quartet
Violins: **Olivia De Prato & Maya Bennardo**
Viola: **Victor Lowrie Tafoya**
Cello: **Tyler J. Borden**

All music composed by **Steve Reich**

All music published by **Boosey & Hawkes**

WTC 9/11 & Triple Quartet
Produced by **Mike Tierney**
Additional production by **Charles Mueller**
Recorded by **Jeff Svatek, Mike Tierney & Charles Mueller**
Mixed by **Mike Tierney** · Mastered by **Silas Brown**

Recorded at **EMPAC Concert Hall, NY / Troy at Cell Labs,**
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Different Trains
Produced by **Mike Tierney**
Recorded by **Jeff Svatek**
Mixed by **Mike Tierney**
Mastered by **Silas Brown**

Recorded at **EMPAC Concert Hall, NY / Troy at Cell Labs,**
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